

They're Back! The Ongoing Grab for Federal Lands

Hunters treasure the National Forests and other public lands. Together, they constitute about one-third of the nation's land base. The National Forests make

up about 10 percent. As human populations grow, these lands, the vast majority of which are open to the public for recreational pursuits — including hunting and fishing — become more valuable. As a result, one scheme after another arises to transfer these lands into private ownership.

Two such schemes failed in the last session of Congress. One would have allowed the ability to file mining claims and then develop the property, and the second would have sold off lands to pay for recovery from Hurricane Katrina.

The latest scheme is to sell off “isolated parcels” of National Forest lands to provide funds for another program. The four living former chiefs of the Forest Service (two of them Professional Members of the Boone and Crockett Club) protested in an open letter to all members of Congress, which was widely reprinted in major newspapers. It seems to have been an effective effort, because many members of Congress and governors have expressed objection. Even the proposed new Secretary of the Interior expressed objections in confirmation hearings. That letter from the former chiefs follows:

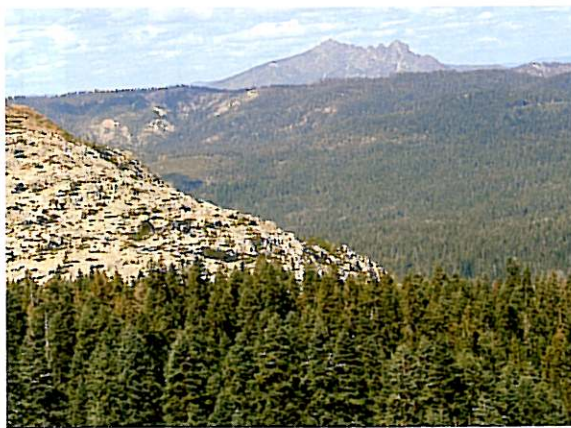
We (the four living former Chiefs of the U. S. Forest Service) are writing you in regard to a proposal in the Administration's proposed budget to auction off \$800 million worth of national forest lands. The lands concerned comprise some 300,000 acres in numerous parcels that are isolated from the national forests proper. The receipts would be used to continue funding for the “Secure Rural Schools Program” as it is phased out over a 5-year period.

It is a long-established custom to

trade such isolated parcels for other lands that enhance the national forest system. In other words, there are isolated difficult to manage parcels that might best be in private ownership. Where feasible that should occur — but only when, in exchange, appropriate additions are made to the National Forests.

The question of whether National Forest lands should be auctioned off to provide funding for another government program should be clearly separated from the question of what would be done with ‘receipts’ from such sales. It should be clearly recognized that such an action will establish an unfortunate precedent contrary to that of the last 102 years. This will require a

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dramatic change to existing law, which explicitly forbids such action.

Should National Forest lands be auctioned off for any other purpose beyond overall enhancement of the National Forest

System? The coupling of a proposal for selling National Forest lands to fund other programs, no matter how worthwhile those programs, is a slippery slope that could, and likely would, be used to fund other worthwhile causes as time passes and budgetary pressures increase along with increasing public debt. For that reason alone, we strongly recommend against taking this first step of auctioning off National Forest lands to pay for other government programs.

The Secure Rural Schools Program was, and is, worthwhile. It was designed to give counties that contain National Forest lands short-term relief from the loss of a share of timber receipts that declined precipitously in the early 1990s. Just when that program should be phased out — today or 5 years from now — is a question for Congress... If that subsidy to public education is to continue for another 5 years, we encourage you to explore other funding options.

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 amended Section 11 of the Forest and Rangelands Renewable Resources Act, which says “...no land now or hereafter reserved or withdrawn from the public domain as National Forests pursuant to the Act of March 3, 1891 or any act supplementary thereto ... shall be returned to the public domain except by an act of Congress...” For the required “act of Congress” to take the form of a few lines in a budget bill is... not in keeping with the magnitude of... long-term consequences that could emanate from such action.

We believe that auctioning off National Forest lands, for any purpose beyond enhancement of the National Forests, would be an unwise precedent....

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never cease — in fact, they will increase as the population increases and the lands soar in value. You can be sure that you'll hear the phrase “They will be back!” over and over again. ■